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Citation style: Wojtaszek Adam. (2009). Forms of salutations in Polish student-to-teacher electronic mails. W: M. Wysocka, B. Leszkiewicz (red.), "On language structure, acquisition and teaching : studies in honour of Janusz Arabski on the occasion of his 70th birthday" (S. 243-255). Katowice : Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego.



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FORMS OF SALUTATIONS IN POLISH STUDENT-TO-TEACHER ELECTRONIC MAILS

Adam Wojtaszek

The world is changing very fast, and so do the social conventions regulating polite behaviour in various contexts. This is at least the impression that most of us would share when asked for opinion. We come across so many situations in which the polite ways we have grown used to are flouted in innumerable ways that the sheer weight of evidence leaves us in no doubt that the world is becoming increasingly unfamiliar and confusing. Living in a global village, stripped of ignorance of other people's ways, forced to elbow our own path in the maze of daily routines, we sometimes seek shelter in the well-established institutions of the society, where the values of the past still appear to have some meaning and enjoy due respect. It seems, however, that the inevitable has already started to sneak into the walls of Academia, and that even this refuge of tradition and solemnity is slowly being subdued by the ruthless obsession of commercial success.

Deliberately exaggerated, the above introduction nevertheless truly reflects the feelings of many university lecturers observing the evolution (or *revolution*, as some of us would say) of tutor—student relationships in the recent decade or so. Not without significant impact on the observable changes is the birth and rise of the Internet as an increasingly common and widespread means of communication¹. The replacement of the traditional face-to-face and letter forms of interpersonal contact with electronic mail in a range of academic contexts has bred a whole new reality of teacher—student interactions. It is especially true of the student—advisor relations, as many of the BA and MA thesis supervisors

¹ Cf. DĄBROWSKA (2006), JASIŃSKA (2001).

would admit. The availability of a medium which eliminates the necessity of personal contact in every situation when a question has to be asked or help sought turns out to be a convenient and frequently employed alternative to student participation in seminars. Indeed, more and more supervisors experience much lower attendance during seminars and office hours, counterbalanced by an ever-growing number of hours spent in front of the computer screen, devoted to answering the impatient and nudging student e-mails, whose volume slowly starts to be a match for the bulk of spam messages.

The language forms applied in such letters differ considerably from both spoken and written style of traditional communication. A number of factors contribute to this observable modification of discourse, but it seems that almost all of them can be traced back to the specific character of the medium in use. The linguistic manifestations of the changes have been very well captured by a comprehensive, although already a bit outdated work by David CRYSTAL *Language and the Internet* (2001). The author goes so far as to announce the emergence of the third, beside the traditional spoken and written, mode of communication, which he calls Netspeak. It is truly a third, new medium, as it is “identical to neither speech nor writing, but [it] selectively and adaptively displays properties of both” (CRYSTAL, 2001: 47). The contextual factors accompanying the act of e-mail communication borrow from both written (graphic form, page layout, no immediate feedback or traditional turn-taking) and spoken (abbreviations, prosody, paralanguage, emoticons, informal style) forms of language, breeding an interesting hybrid, to which an entire chapter is devoted in Crystal’s book, listing e-mails among five distinct “internet-using situations”².

Student—teacher e-mails constitute a specific subcategory of electronic messages, influenced by the social constraints related to the status encoding of participants and to the requirement of increased level of explicitness. The former necessitate the reflection of the perceived status of the student and the teacher in the university context, whereas the latter is a consequence of the fact that the author of the message may be difficult to identify and the request included in it not sufficiently clear for the addressee. The language of such e-mails displays interesting features especially in relation to two elements of the structure which are almost always present: the greetings or salutations in the opening of the message and the request formulated in the body of the letter. The salutation seems to be a necessary element for a number of reasons: it serves as a summons or an address term, which marks the beginning of the discourse, it establishes or confirms the status relationship, it resembles a conversational call for attention and it may optionally encode additional exponents of

² The other four are *chatgroups*, *synchronous* and *asynchronous virtual worlds* and *world wide web*.

attitude. When it comes to the request in the body copy, it appears in the majority of student-teacher e-mails due to the specific teleological nature of such contacts: one of the “licensed” reasons for sending e-mails to one’s tutor is the help-seeking motive, as an extension of the professional academic setting. Due to the limitations imposed on the size of the publication, the present paper focuses on the forms of greetings and salutations, leaving the investigation of the requesting behaviour to a separate study.

There is a large body of literature describing the norms and patterns governing the use of addressative forms. ADLER (1978), BOGUSŁAWSKI (1987), BRAUN (1988) and LUBECKA (1993) present a multilingual and multicultural perspective on the issue, while ANTAS (2002), GRYBOSIOWA (1998), JAWORSKI (1992), KITA (2005), MARCIANIK (2007 a, 2007 b) and PIŚARKOWA (1979) focus on the linguistic realisations of the phenomenon in Polish. Many of the works mentioned point to the dynamic characteristics of the process in the recent years. GRYBOSIOWA (1998), for instance, in her analysis of the *ty/Pan(i)* dichotomy, attempts to capture the evolution of the system, showing how the changes frequently result in confusion and uncertainty among the younger users of language. SKUDRZYKOWA and WARCHALA (2002) present the ongoing changes as natural consequences of the Polish sociopolitical transformations in the years 1980 and 1989, looking for explanations for the widespread use of colloquial language in the remodelling of sociolinguistic determinants of interpersonal communication. Their explanatory and descriptive account can be opposed to more conservative and prescriptive attitude represented by MARCIANIK (2007 a) or SKARŻYŃSKI (2008), who see themselves as guardians of the long-established etiquette. The present paper will attempt to balance these two approaches, evaluating the appropriateness of the items under scrutiny against the principles of *savoir-vivre*, striving at the same time to find functional and utilitarian explanations for the choices made by the authors of the e-mails.

The material for analysis comprises 341 electronic messages received by the author of the article from his students in the period between October 2007 and June 2008. They were not subjected to any form of pre-selection, in order to avoid any form of bias. Messages older than 8 months are automatically removed from the inbox, so the e-mails analysed below represent the complete collection of student—teacher correspondence in the academic year 2007/2008. The salutations and greetings have been carefully categorised and analysed, both quantitatively and qualitatively. The complete data set is to be found in Table 1 at the end of the article, while the results of the analysis are presented below.

There are five major groups of salutation types which have been identified. The first one is characterized by the use of the titular form including the academic degree of the addressee, optionally accompanied by additional lexical marker of deference and respect. The second one comprises salutations using

the academic degree combined with greetings related to the time of the day. In the third group we find salutations by means of the *quasi*-performative verb *witam* ‘welcome’ (1st pers. sg. present tense), optionally accompanied with the titular degree marker. The fourth group comprises greetings including the addressee’s name (first, second or both) or just the word *Pan* ‘Mr’. Finally, messages which did not contain any form of salutation at the beginning were classified into the fifth group. The relative frequency of the major salutation types is presented in Figure 1.

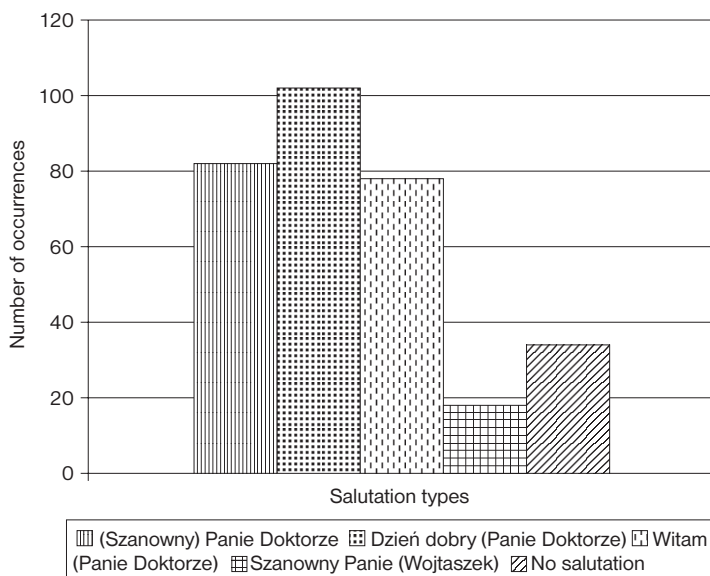


Fig. 1. Five major groups of salutation type

The first group includes salutations which are closest to the standard etiquette, although the principles governing the polite behaviour in electronic mails are still in the making. MARCJANIK (2007 a) maintains that the combination of the titular form (*Panie Doktorze* ‘Mr Doctor’ (vocative) in this case) with the lexical marker of deference and respect *Szanowny* ‘Respectable’ is one of the most appropriate options³ in contacts with people positioned higher in the social hierarchy. This option, in its various orthographic configurations, occurred 48 times in the data, the most frequent being the version with all words

³ The most appropriate and neutral form in such contexts is, according to MARCJANIK (2007 a), *Szanowny Panie/Pani* [‘Respectable Sir/Madame’]. In the author’s opinion, however, this form seems to be less appropriate due to its connotative associations with formal written correspondence, implying an institutional sender, or at least one who does not know either the name or the academic degree of the addressee. In e-mail correspondence between the students and the lecturers it may be assumed, or at least expected, that the former should know both the name and

written with first capital letters and followed by a comma. In one of the cases instead of the word *Szanowny*, the term *Drogi* 'Dear' appeared, which seems to encode an unwarranted degree of familiarity. The other variants included some of the words without capital letters and different punctuation marks at the end (exclamation mark or full stop), and even one instance of misspelled salutation, indicative of the author's careless and hasty attitude.

Almost equal in size (40 instances) is the group of salutations including only the titular form *Panie Doktorze* 'Mr Doctor' (vocative) without any accompanying markers of respect, which are a little lower on the scale of politeness, but still making the impression of high degree of appropriateness. Its most frequent representative is the capitalized version with a comma (15 times), followed by the same form with an exclamation mark (11 times). Sometimes the word *doktorze* occurs without the initial capital, and in 3 e-mails (from the same author) an untypical form, *Panie Dr*, with an abbreviated title, has been found. It seems completely out of place, because in written correspondence, in the salutation line, the vocative form is required, which is not available in an abbreviated form. Such abbreviations could be used in the address on an envelope, or in cases of reference (not direct address), combined with the family name of the person. Probably the reason for the use of the form described above was the intention to save time and increase the economy of expression, unfortunately at the cost of perceivable politeness. Collectively, the two sub-types discussed above amount to the second largest group in the data. It seems that the users of this salutation strategy approach writing e-mails in a fashion resembling the composition of traditional letters. The electronic form does not change the basic principles of language use in formal written correspondence, which are transferred to the new medium of communication. For the more traditional addressees, such forms of salutation are the most welcome and appropriate, and could be recommended to the students as the safest option.

Undoubtedly the largest group is represented by salutations including a greeting *Dzień dobry/Dobry wieczór* 'Good day'/'Good evening', optionally followed by the titular form *Panie Doktorze*. There were 60 occurrences of *Dzień dobry* alone, 23 cases of *Dzień dobry Panie Doktorze*, 23 times *Dobry wieczór* alone was used, and this form was followed by *Panie Doktorze* in 3 e-mails. All of them were used in different orthographic configurations, with or without initial capitals, without punctuation or with different punctuation marks including commas, full stops, exclamation marks and even one instance of a smiley emoticon. The most frequently occurring versions are those with com-

the title of the latter, so in situations when the titular form is not applied it makes an impression of lack of due respect on the part of the students. It simply implies that they either do not know the proper title or that they know it and deliberately choose not to use it.

mas and with exclamation marks. There was one e-mail written in English, in which *Good morning* was found in the opening line. Interestingly, all e-mails including the *Dobry wieczór* ‘*Good evening*’ heading were written after 8 p.m., or even very late at night. It seems that this is the more marked option of a salutation, chosen only in specific circumstances, when the letters were composed late and the authors were hoping that they will be read soon afterwards. The form *Dzień dobry* ‘*Good day*’, which is appropriate in spoken Polish throughout the whole day until when it starts getting dark, was being used at all times, both during the day and in the evenings. It seems that the marked use of *Dobry wieczór* in the spoken language only for salutations after dark has been preserved in electronic mails, while the form *Dzień dobry* has extended its use to all times of the day and night. It is a natural consequence of absence of immediacy and face-to-face contact between the sender and the addressee, as the former is not capable of predicting when exactly the message will be received and read by the latter. In this situation *Dzień dobry* seems to be a safer option, because it covers a larger time-span and doesn’t sound very inappropriate even in the evening, contrasted with acute incongruity of *Dobry wieczór* used during the day-time.

The combination of the greetings with the titular form *Panie Doktorze* makes the salutation a little more polite, because the addressee has an impression that proper care was taken and additional attention devoted to the suitable recognition of his social position. However, this option is employed in approximately one out of four salutations of the type discussed above. It is probably related to the fact that such headings are very long and quite inconvenient, as many decisions have to be made about the spelling conventions, concerning especially the use of capital letters. The study reveals high variability in this respect, as almost all possible options have been found in the collected material.

It seems that the form of salutation described above is slowly becoming a standard in e-mails. In the material gathered for the purpose of the present study it represents the largest group. One of its advantages is that it potentially introduces a stylistic differentiation between paper letter communication and electronic mails. MARCIANIK (2007 a) observes that many e-mails nowadays exhibit a visible incongruity between the opening lines, which resemble greetings found in spoken exchanges, employed in face-to-face contacts (*Dzień dobry*, *Cześć* ‘*Hi*’, *Hej* ‘*Hey*’, *Witam*), and the closings, frequently including phrases borrowed directly from paper correspondence (*Z poważaniem* ‘*With high regard*’, (*Serdecznie*) *pozdrawiam* ‘*Heartily salute*’ (1st pers. sg. present tense), *Z wyrazami szacunku* ‘*With words of respect*’). However, it does not have to be interpreted as something negative, because electronic mails do not have to imitate all the formal properties of traditional letters, they are in the process of forming their own standards. Thus, the incompatibility, instead of causing un-

welcome confusion, may actually constitute a natural and common feature of the new form of communication.

In the third group, also in terms of quantity, 83 examples have been found of salutations employing the pseudo-performative verb *Witam* 'Welcome' (1st pers. sg. present tense). I call it pseudo-performative because although formally it exhibits all the features of performative verbs, it is very rarely used in the strictly performative sense. Nowadays it is used as a greeting initiating interaction mainly in spoken exchanges, and in its present function it was introduced as a successor of an earlier form *Witaj* '(you) Welcome' (imperative) (CYBULSKI, 2003). According to MARCIANIK (2007 a: 52—53) and SKARŻYŃSKI (2008) this form is inappropriate in student-initiated interaction, as it encodes a higher status of the sender. In their opinion, it can only be used by people enjoying higher social position in contacts with those of lower status, not the other way round. Because in the academic contexts lecturers are positioned definitely higher than the students⁴, such forms used by the latter should be considered as unwarranted and unwelcome. Indeed, this is the form which is negatively received and condemned by most of my colleagues, when the topic accidentally turns up in a conversation. On the other hand, however, it seems to possess a number of attractive advantages, when we consider its use from a purely utilitarian perspective. Firstly, it is very short and for this reason its use is quite convenient. Secondly, its grammatical form encodes the first person, so it can be treated as an exponent of individual, active attitude. Thirdly, it can serve as yet another characteristic feature of electronic correspondence, differentiating it from traditional paper letter-writing. Finally, contrary to Marcjanik's view, it has lost its status-encoding connotations for many younger users of language, who treat it as a completely neutral salutation, which may be very conveniently used, especially in situations involving computer-mediated communication. More and more often contacts via e-mails are initiated with people whose social position, age and sometimes even sex are unknown to the senders⁵. In student—lecturer contacts this is obviously not the case, but still the form enables

⁴ It has to be admitted, however, that in private institutions of higher education a different perspective slowly starts to suppress the traditional roles ascribed to scholars and students. The former are more and more often viewed as service-providers for the latter. The students take the position of customers purchasing educational services from the lecturers, and as customers they have the right to demand high quality of service. Regrettably, they are often silently supported in such an approach by the managers of those institutions.

⁵ This is especially true of such virtual environments as internet auction services (e.g. Allegro), where participants of transactions know little more about the addressees of their e-mails than the nick and location. In such situations, where the relative positions of the sender and addressee remain uncertain, the use of salutations encoding certain status or position are out of question. *Witam* then becomes a very convenient option, because it is short, it can be used in contacts with people whom we could address as *ty*, as well as with those where *Pan/Pani* forms would be necessary.

the senders to circumvent the necessity of defining the mutual roles of the participants of the communicative act. Often the senders of such e-mails are the ones who are not really certain what kind of social positions are occupied by the students and the teachers in modern society, or they are uncertain whether their mutual roles are those of respectable mentor and humble follower or a flexible service-provider and demanding customer, whose satisfaction is the warrant of the former's position.

From the quantitative perspective, in the gathered material the form *Witam* followed by a comma or by an exclamation mark is the most frequent (54 instances), followed by 11 occurrences of the verb accompanied by the adverb *serdecznie* 'heartily'. The latter form makes the salutation a bit warmer, without making the impression of unwelcome familiarization. The remaining examples either use different punctuation devices or are accompanied by titular form *Panie Doktorze* 'Mr Doctor', and only occasionally by the less appropriate items *Doktorze* 'Doctor' (vocative) or *Pana* 'Mr' (accusative), the latter defining the function of the titular form as a direct object of the verb. Twice the plural form of the verb has been noted, in e-mails written on behalf of the whole group of students. Interestingly, in one of those e-mails, the singular form of verbs was used in some parts of the body of the letter, as if the sender was forgetting from time to time that s/he represented the whole group. In additional two e-mails the word *ponownie* 'again' was used, in order to turn the addressee's attention to the fact that there was a recent previous contact established.

The fourth group contains 11 occurrences of *Szanowny Panie* 'Respectable Sir' (vocative), and 12 instances of other salutations incorporating the addressee's name. The former seems to be inappropriate in the situation when the senders know the academic degree of the addressee⁶. The latter sound inappropriate for a different reason, since the use of the addressee's name seems to be reserved for people positioned higher in the structure of the university, especially in instances when the first name only was employed (*Szanowny Panie Adamie* 'Respectable Mr Adam' (vocative) or even *Panie Adamie* 'Mr Adam' (vocative). There were 5 instances of such salutations, encoding unwelcome and unwarranted attempts at familiarization and lack of suitable deference. Finally, yet another, very interesting example has been noted in this group. In three e-mails (from the same author) the opening *Do dr Wojtaszka* 'To dr Wojtaszek' (genitive) was used. The genitive form of the family name is required by the preposition used in the construction, but the whole phrase seems completely out of place, for a couple of reasons. Firstly, such a letter opening cannot really be treated as a form of greeting or salutation, it looks more like the information to

⁶ The senders of those e-mails were the students writing MA theses supervised by the author of this paper, meeting him regularly during MA seminars.

whom the message is directed. It would be more suitable in a context when the message is displayed in a public place in hope that the addressee will find and read it. Secondly, it makes the impression that the sender of the message occupies a higher social position than the addressee, who is not even treated as an addressee, but merely as a referent. Such letter openings very acutely expose the sender's communicative incompetence and ignorance of basic rules of politeness.

Finally, the fifth group of e-mails encompasses the messages without opening lines (38 items). They can be divided into three distinct sub-groups. The smallest encompasses three e-mails which cannot really be named messages, for the simple reason that they do not contain any text whatsoever. Their authors did not bother to write anything, they just attached files with texts which they expected to be read and marked by the addressee. Such attitude on the part of the students gives the impression of their being quite rude, as the considerations connected with the economy of expression totally overrode the requirements of clarity and basic politeness. In the remaining 35 examples the messages containing no salutations were either treated as polite or as mildly rude. The impression of politeness was reserved for those e-mails which continued a longer exchange of message-response sequences. In such instances no forms of additional salutation seemed necessary and the resignation thereof was fully justified. There were, however, a number of instances when the e-mails were initiating the contact, and the lack of salutation or greeting at the beginning was markedly inappropriate.

Summing up, the analysis of the forms of salutations found in student—teacher e-mails reveals a number of interesting facts. One of the noteworthy observations is the emergence of a number of formal markers of e-mail communication, placing it somewhere between the traditional spoken and written codes. It is especially evidenced by the high popularity of such items as *Witam* or *Dzień dobry*, which have already superseded the more traditional openings found in paper letters. Another interesting reflection pertains to the changing perception of the academic tuition among the younger generation. The roles and status of university lecturers and students are being redefined to match the requirements of modern market economy, whether we like it or not. New language habits which have been popularized in the media and are still evolving in new communicational environments are slowly finding their way into the more conservative academic settings. One of the social communicative situations identified by LUBAŚ (1979) seems to disappear, as in almost all contexts it evolves into semi-casual or casual direction ("B" and "C" types, LUBAŚ, 1979). The new behaviours do not have to be treated as pragmatic failures (THOMAS, 1983; JAWORSKI, 1994), although it sometimes seems that the younger generation speaks a completely different language. It can only be hoped that the new reality will bring new forms of politeness to replace the more traditional

ones. They may not be based on recognition of a pre-defined social position, they could ascribe a bigger value to the economy of expression, but it would be regrettable if they did away with all markers of respect.

Table 1

The corpus of salutation types in student—teacher e-mails

Salutation	Quantity	Orthographic details
Panie Doktorze	1	no punctuation
Panie Doktorze!	11	excl. mark
Panie Doktorze,	15	comma
Panie Doktorze.	1	full stop
Panie doktorze	1	no punctuation, no capital
Panie doktorze,	8	comma, no capital
Panie Dr,	3	abbreviation, comma
Panie Doktorze (total)	40	
Szanowny Panie Doktorze,	35	comma
Szanowny Panie Doktorze!	2	excl. mark
Szanowny Panie doktorze,	8	comma, one capital
Szanowny panie doktorze,	1	comma, no capital
Sanowny panie doktorze,	1	comma, no capital, mistake
Drogi Panie doktorze,	1	comma
Szanowny Panie Doktorze (total)	48	
Good morning,	1	English
Dzień dobry	10	no punctuation
Dzień Dobry	1	no punctuation, capital
Dzień dobry,	25	comma
dzień dobry,	1	comma, no capitals
Dzień dobry!	11	excl. mark
Dzień Dobry!	1	excl. mark, capital
Dzień dobry.	4	full stop
Dzień Dobry.	5	full stop, capital
Dzień dobry :)	1	smiley
Dzień dobry (total)	60	
Dzień Dobry Panie Doktorze.	1	all caps, full stop
Dzień dobry Panie Doktorze	2	caps, no punctuation
Dzień dobry Panie Doktorze,	11	caps, comma
Dzień dobry Panie Doktorze!	2	caps, excl. mark
Dzień dobry Panie Doktorze.	3	caps, full stop
Dzień dobry Panie doktorze,	2	one cap, comma
Dzień dobry Panie doktorze.	2	one cap, full stop
Dzień dobry Panie Doktorze (total)	23	

con. tab. 1

Dobry wieczór	7	no punctuation
Dobry wieczór,	5	comma
Dobry wieczór!	8	excl. mark
Dobry wieczór.	1	full stop
Dobry Wieczór	1	no punctuation, cap
Dobry Wieczór.	1	full stop, cap
Dobry wieczór Panie Doktorze,	2	comma, addressative
Dobry wieczór Panie Doktorze!	1	excl. mark, addressative
Dobry wieczór (total)	26	
Witam	5	no punctuation
Witam!	22	excl. mark
Witam,	32	comma
Witam.	1	full stop
Witam serdecznie	1	no punctuation
Witam serdecznie,	11	comma
Witam serdecznie :)	1	smiley
Witam serdecznie :-)	1	smiley with nose
Witam ponownie	1	no punctuation
Witam ponownie Panie Doktorze,	1	comma
Witam Panie Doktorze,	1	comma
Witam Doktorze!	1	excl. mark
Witam, Doktorze!	1	comma, excl. mark
Witam, Doktorze.	1	full stop
Witam Pana,	1	comma
Witam.	1	full stop
Witam Panie Doktorze,	1	comma
Witam (total)	83	
Szanowny Panie,	11	comma
Szanowny Panie Wojtaszek,	1	comma
Szanowny Doktorze Wojtaszek	1	no punctuation
Szanowny dr Wojtaszek	1	abbreviation, no punctuation
Panie dr Adamie Wojtaszek,	1	comma
Szanowny Panie Adamie	1	no punctuation
Szanowny Panie Adamie,	2	comma
Panie Adamie,	2	comma
Do dr Wojtaszka,	3	comma
Proper name (total)	12	
No salutation, with the text	35	
No salutation, no text	3	
GRAND TOTAL	341	

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